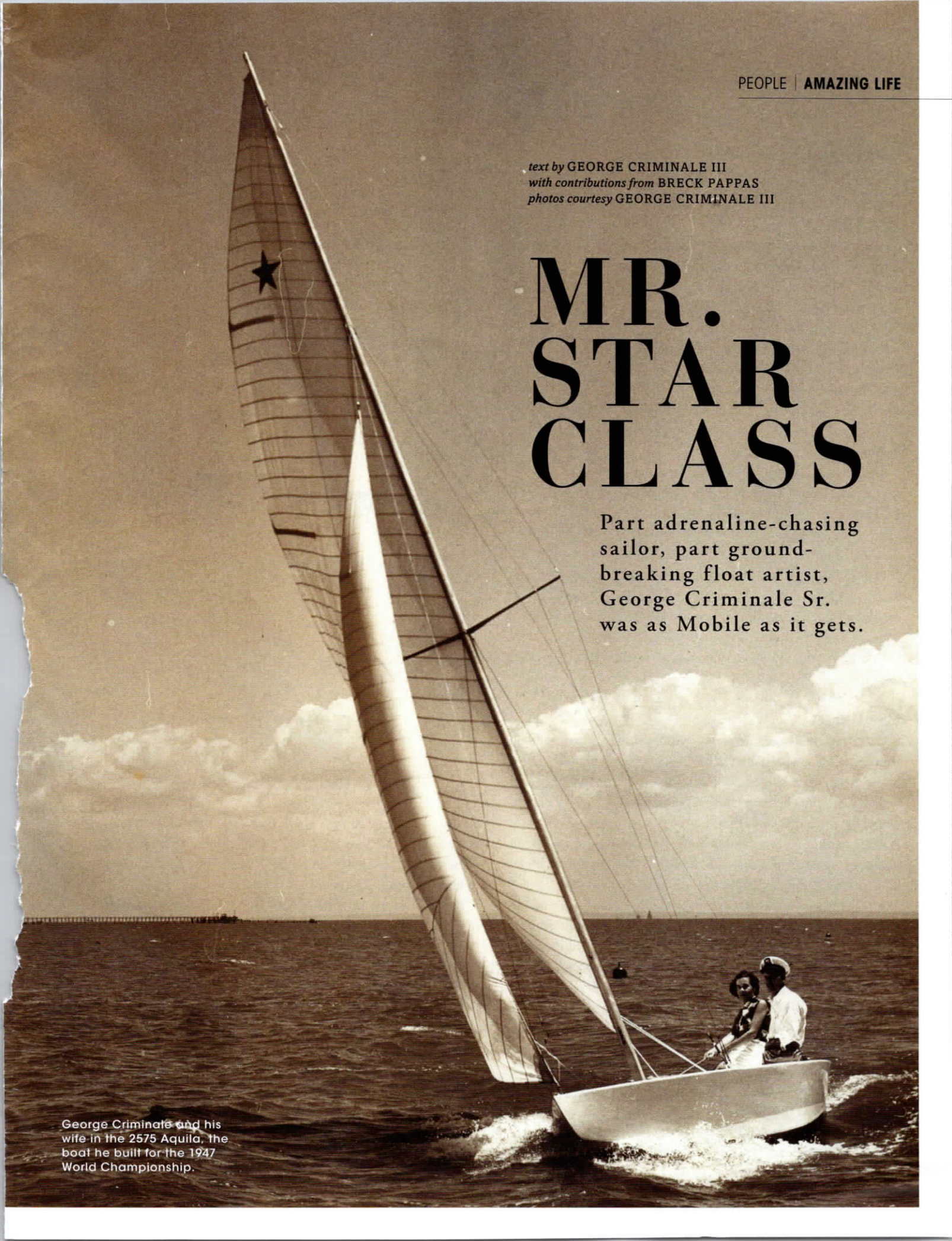


text by GEORGE CRIMINALE III
with contributions from BRECK PAPPAS
photos courtesy GEORGE CRIMINALE III

MR. STAR CLASS

Part adrenaline-chasing sailor, part ground-breaking float artist, George Criminale Sr. was as Mobile as it gets.

George Criminale and his wife in the 2575 Aquila, the boat he built for the 1947 World Championship.



GEORGE CRIMINALE SPENT HIS 91ST BIRTHDAY AS HE SPENT A LOT OF HIS LIFE: RACING A SAILBOAT.

Anyone who saw him that day might've been surprised to see a man of his age braving the swells — but not those who knew him well. True passion doesn't fade with time or age. And George was passionate about racing.

As a lifelong member of the Mobile and Buccaneer Yacht Clubs, the Gulf Yachting Association and the International Star Class Yachting Association, George (or "Mr. Star Class" as he came to be known) was a legend of the Mobile boating scene.

He was also my grandfather. But what's truly remarkable about George is that he's considered a legend in other Mobile circles as well — as a sign painter, a Mardi Gras float designer, even in the art of illumination.

Generations of Mobilians encountered his handiwork; if you lived in Mobile in the 1940s or 50s and you went Downtown, his creative work was everywhere, in everyone's face. He was an artist, a maker, a creative individual in everything he did.

In other words, there was a lot more to this sailor than met the eye.

Sign Painter

Born in 1909, George Clarence Criminale lived his entire life in Mobile. He was named after his maternal grandfather George Myrick, who was named Mobile's fire chief in 1919 and later served as the city's first fire marshal, ushering the city's fire department into the motorized age.

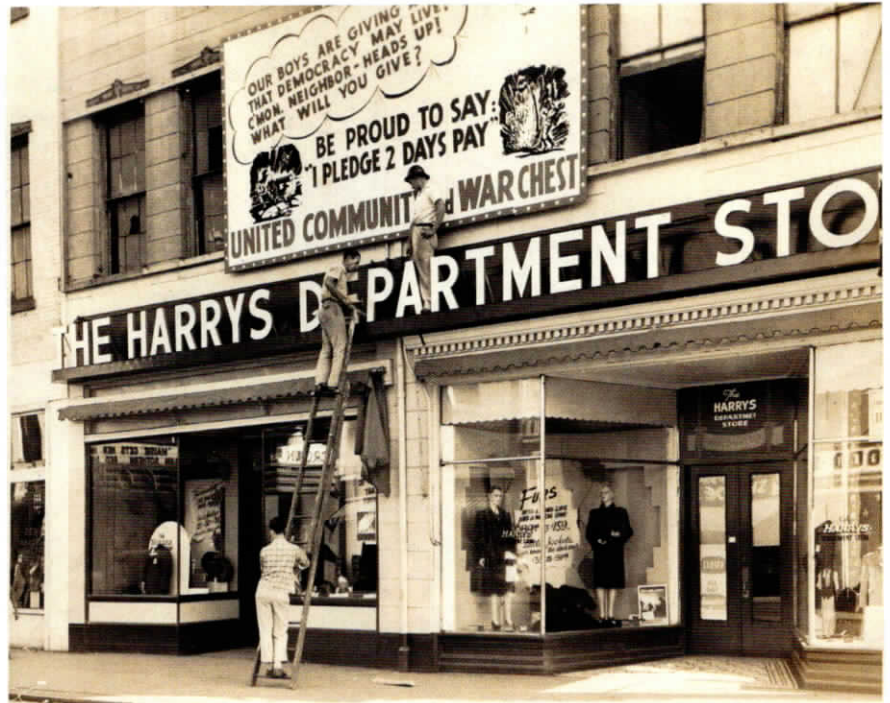
The uncommon last name, Criminale, comes from the Mediterranean; George's paternal grandfather settled in Mobile after a journey from Malta, an island country just south of Sicily.

A lot of what happened in my grandfather's life can be traced back to the Mobile theaters of old. As a teenager, he found work as an usher at most of the city's classic theaters: the Saenger, the Lyric, the Empire, the Crescent, the Crown. When Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer," the first film to feature speech and sound effects, played at Mobile's Crescent Theater in 1927, George was there.

One night at the Crown, he befriended the ticket taker, an older gentleman who took a liking to the 18-year-old. The ticket taker also happened to paint Mardi Gras floats.

The man showed George pictures of the floats he had worked on. He described the process of building a float from the ground up. The creative flicker within the teenager burst into flame.

This older gentleman wasn't just the ticket taker for the theater;



Above and right In 1942, George Criminale began to learn the art of sign painting, soon becoming the display and ad manager for Harry's Department store.



he also painted the Saenger's advertisements, signs and even movie posters. If George was interested in the creative arts, what better place to start than right there at the theater? The young man began to learn the art of sign painting.

If you've ever seen photographs of downtown Mobile from the 1930s, 40s, or 50s, you know that the city was plastered with hand-painted signs. Before television, if you wanted to visually advertise something, you had to rely on a sign painter — and you better hope you found a good one.

This was the world that George decided he wanted to be a part of. He found work at a local sign painting company, where he gained valuable experience working on signs for notable Mobile businesses such as Malbis Bakery. Before long, the ambitious young man ventured out on his own and founded General Display Company. He ran his shop out of the second floor in a building at the corner of Dauphin and Royal Streets.

But my grandfather's ambitions hit a bump at the outbreak of



World War II. With many younger employees leaving to assist in the war effort, he searched for other opportunities. In 1942, he became the display and ad manager for Harry's Department store. In this role, a crucial one in the era of window shopping, George designed vast window displays that were updated seasonally, luring in customers off Mobile's sidewalks.

After a time at Harry's, George eventually went to work in the same capacity for Gayfer's downtown. The young man had proved to Mobile, and himself, that he was wildly resourceful. Having lost his workforce to World War II, he was forced down a new path — and he turned himself into the most dynamic window display designer in the city.

Boat Racer

Through sign painting, George would discover another lifelong passion. In 1931, a couple of local sailors went to New Orleans to buy Star-class racing boats and brought them to my grandfather to paint the boat names. He was immediately intrigued.

Two years later, he bought one of those same boats, Spika 254, and began his obsession with racing Star-fleet yachts.

"It's been a life of heaven when you find something and stick to it as long as I have," George told a newspaper reporter in 1992. "Back in the Depression years when I didn't have a full-time job, me and a friend would go out on the Bay and sail all day and into the night."



From left to right Crimiale with his wife Inez at Mobile Yacht Club. Crimiale (on the right) in his shop in the early 1930s on the second floor of the building on the corner of Royal and Dauphin streets.

His thrill grew from a pure love for the sport. He wanted to introduce everyone he could to sailing, so he worked to build up the Star fleet here in Mobile Bay. A charter member of the Mobile Bay Star Fleet, he bought, repaired and restored Star boats constantly.

George began sailing at the highest level of competition, participating in four Star world championships: 1945, 1946, 1947 and 1951. This passion carried him across the world, to Cuba, Venezuela, New York, Canada. He eventually broke the record for the longest race ever in a Star boat — 175 miles from New Orleans to Mobile, nonstop.

Even in sailing, he seemed to find ways to be creative and work with his hands. At the 1947 world championship in California, Crimiale competed in a Star boat that he built himself. To top it all off, he had not raced it prior to arriving in Los Angeles. In other words, he had turned a stack of lumber into a championship-worthy sailing vessel.

He served as commodore of the Mobile Yacht Club five times and was also commodore of the Gulf Yachting Association, responsible for the organized sailings of 33 yacht clubs stretching across six Southern states.

Float Designer

A man of Georges creative talents and energy in a city such as Mobile could only mean one thing: He was on a collision course with Mardi Gras.

A decade after becoming fascinated with Mardi Gras floats while working at the Saenger, George's first float won a prize for design in the 1938 Floral Parade. At that time, the Floral Parade consisted of floats entered by local businesses and organizations



as a means of advertisement. Criminale made the float for the Buccaneer Yacht Club.

The base of the float? You might've guessed it: his Star boat, Spika 254. Pulled behind George's convertible, the float was hardly recognizable as a boat, so covered it was in flowers from stem to stern.

George and his float creations became a fixture in the Floral Parade over the next several years, until he was invited to take over the entire parade. He was also asked to manage the annual Christmas parade. For over 20 years, the Floral and Christmas parades were my grandfather's creations. And if folks didn't already recognize his work ethic and passion as a sign painter, they certainly took notice of George as a float designer and parade organizer. As noted by the Mobile Press-Register, he "was among the first to use electric lights rather than the traditional torches or flambeaus to illuminate his creations."

In 1958, he began painting the signs for the Comic Cowboys, and he retained that role into the '90s. In 1950, he also started building the floats for the Mystic Strippers, a gig he would continue for the next 30 years. In 1989, the 50th anniversary of the Strippers, Criminale was invited to ride atop a pink wagon in the Strippers



Clockwise from top Criminale's first float, pictured Saturday, February 26, 1938. Criminale working on the Floral Parade in the 1940s. Opposite page, clockwise from top George Criminale. Criminale in his 254 Spika.



“It’s been a life of heaven when you find something and stick to it as long as I have. Back in the Depression years when I didn’t have a full-time job, me and a friend would go out on the Bay and sail all day and into the night.” — Criminale told a newspaper reporter in 1992



parade as an honorary member. He would become one of only nine people to receive the coveted Order of the Mystic Stripers Society Award.

George’s son, George Jr., says some of his earliest memories are in a float barn, watching his dad work. Criminale would even bring a TV along to the barn so that George Jr. could watch Saturday cartoons.

It should be no surprise that George Jr. took to the technical aspects of Mardi Gras like his father. By 13, he started doing the lighting for the Mystic Stripers floats, and today he does electrical work for more than a half-dozen local parades. Bringing the story full-circle, George Jr. has also worked on the stage lighting of the Saenger Theatre, where his father had found so much creative inspiration decades before.

Goodbye Mr. Star Class

Upon my grandfather’s death in 2007, those who knew him understood that Mobile had lost more than a sailor and an artist. Over his 97 years, George himself had become a piece of the city’s history. His obituary noted, “His recollections of the old firehouses, working at the Saenger Theatre during Vaudeville shows, riding the street cars, watching the Mobile Bears, and following the continuing development of Mobile’s waterfront and downtown for recreation were particular favorites of family and friends alike.”

But the photos remain. Thankfully, my grandparents had an arsenal of cameras over the years, and they used them. Stacks of photographs show my grandparents dressed to the nines for a Mardi Gras ball or Criminale working in a float barn with a rope

belt holding up his trousers. They’re coastal, casual, interesting and eccentric — so Mobile.

A Star-class yacht bearing the flags of Mobile Yacht Club and Buccaneer Yacht Club was towed to Criminale’s graveside service at Magnolia Cemetery, as was the very Mardi Gras wagon he rode as an honorary Striper. It’s hard to imagine a better send-off for one of Mobile’s most original sons.

As Errol “Budda” Collier, a member of the Stripers, told the Mobile Press-Register on that day, “His palette was those floats. His galleries were the streets of Mobile.” **MB**

George Criminale III is the principal designer of Studio Criminale — an interdisciplinary design studio — and is the grandson of George Clarence Criminale Sr.

